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ABSTRACT

Children who are "at risk" are differentiated by their difficulty meeting standards for school success. This paper describes a model for a field-based component of an elementary education children's literature course involving in-school tutoring of at risk children. The program provided preservice teachers the opportunity to: (1) develop strategies and expand concepts introduced in the children's literature course through authentic teaching situations; (2) learn the problems encountered by children from diverse backgrounds; and (3) reflect on and critique their instructional practices. The study included a total of 88 college students enrolled in 3 children's literature classes during the 1994-95 academic year. The students worked with 149 elementary school students who had been selected for the tutoring program for various reasons, including lack of progress in reading/communication skills, non-supportive home environments, lack of confidence or self-esteem, shyness, and being a non-native English speaker. The goals for the college students were to develop in the child a liking for reading and to enhance the child's self-esteem or self-concept and literacy skills. The teacher education students were overwhelmingly positive about their experience. They were able to establish rapport with children who were from culturally diverse groups; they learned to view children with problems as individuals rather than problems; they became familiar with how schools function and the classroom teacher's difficulty in juggling multiple schedules; they used problem solving skills in selecting materials and teaching strategies; and they developed confidence in their choice of teaching as a profession. Classroom teachers were very positive about the tutoring program and the college students' work, and they identified a number of positive behavior changes in the children. Findings support research on the relationship between self-esteem and learning, the importance of identification and modeling, and the need for authentic learning through school partnerships. (ND)

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Authentic Learning with At Risk Elementary School Children

Diversity has many facets: cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, racial, mental and phsycial abilities, social, economic, age, and gender. Children who are "at risk" are differentiated by their difficulty or inability to meet the standards for school success. As more children are identified as "at risk" for school failure, teacher education programs must become responsive in training future teachers to work with these children. Demographic research has demonstrated that a disproportionate number of at risk children come from lower socio-economic status homes or those where English is not the native language. This background is in contrast to the bulk of America's teachers who come from middle class English speaking settings (McGrew-Zoubi & Brown, 1995).

Objectives

This paper describes a model for a field-based component of an elementary education children's literature course which involves in-school tutoring of at risk children. The program provides preservice teachers the opportunity to (a) develop strategies and expand concepts introduced in the children's literature course through authentic teaching situations; (b) learn the problems encountered by children from diverse backgrounds; and (c) reflect and critique their instructional practices. The goals for college students in the program are to develop in the child a liking for reading and to enhance the child's self-esteem or self-concept and literacy skills.

Perspectives

Traditional field experiences for future elementary education teachers generally consist of school observation early in the teacher education program with a culminating experience of student teaching during the last semester of the preservice period. Short intervals or a series of projects in the schools prior to student teaching are also included. The model in elementary education today begins with early school observation experiences and includes increasing involvement in the schools with classes or portions of classes being site based. The preservice training culminates with an extended period of intensive field experience labeled as student teaching or internship.

The literature-based field component described in this program compliments involvement with partner schools by allowing college students the opportunity to do

indepth studies and tutoring over an entire semester with children who are at risk of school failure. According to Ashton (1990), preservice teachers hold implicit theories about students. This experience provides students the opportunity to test their ideas about at risk students in a limited, controlled situation, designed to produce success. College students generally work one-on-one with children in the school setting, although students may elect to work with two or possibly three children.

The children tutored in this study were identified by their classroom teachers as needing additional help based on lack of progress in literacy/communcation skills, lack of English language proficiency and/or low self-esteem. The children involved in this study all live in Northwest Arkansas where there has been a heavy influx of Mexican families to supply workers for the low paying jobs of the chicken industry. According to Schauffler (1994), about half of the U. S. immigrant population is hindered by an inability to communicate well in English. For children, the problem is increased since little on no English is spoken in the home. Low socio-economic status was a generalized factor across the tutored group.

The field-based component of the children's literature class provided an authentic learning experience with at risk children. Of the 88 college students enrolled in the literature classes, all were either elementary or special education majors with the exception of three students. Children's literature is the first professional specialty course for elementary education majors. While children's literature is primarily a content course, aspects of pedagogy are incorporated in the field-based component. The data for this study were collected during the 1994-95 academic year. The program described had been developed and revised over the preceding three years.

Method

All students in the children's literature class were required to complete a field-based course component for a minimum of 10 weeks with a minimum of one hour per week of contact time with a tutored child(ren). The tutored children were selected by their classroom teachers and met with their tutors during the school day at their respective schools.

Prior to meeting the children, college students were given classroom instruction on developing rapport with children, strategies for using and selecting literature, and ways to involve children in the reading process. A handout of suggestions for working with the children was also distributed. College students were made aware of some of the types of concerns that they might encounter in school settings: student absence or leaving

the school, change of schedules, relevation of home situations, logistical matters such as where to work with the children, and establishing interpersonal relationships with cooperating teachers and the children to be tutored.

Depending upon the developmental level of the selected children and the college student's schedule, an arrangement was made for the student to work with one or two children. Kindergarten and lower primary grade children were met for a half hour timeframe either twice a week or two children for a half hour each. Thus, a college student might tutor one or two children over the semester. Children moving or leaving the school were replaced by other children entering the tutoring program.

College students were encouraged to discuss tutoring concerns in college classes and get input from other students. The college class instructor was available to students for consultation and guided the students in selection of materials and strategies. Two classes during the semester were devoted to discussion of the school tutoring experiences, but students also shared ideas and requested help as needed throughout the semester. Final evaluation consisted of both an oral class discussion and a written report.

At the end of the semester, based on their journal notes, students submitted a written report on their school tutoring project along with an evaluation of the experience by the classroom teacher. The college instructor evaluated the student report, provided feedback, and an opportunity for the students to discuss the total assignment relevant to its merits, problems, or needs for change.

Data Collection

Data for this authentic learning experience component of the children's literature class came from the following: (a) college students' written and oral reports, (b) cooperating teachers' written and oral reports, and (c) children's included works and writings to college students. At the completion of the tutoring experience, college students wrote reports describing the information acquired about the following: children's background and reasons of selection for this program; emergent literacy skills; materials and strategies used in tutoring; interaction with children; samples of children's work; cooperating teachers; and their impression of the experience. College students also had the opportunity to discuss their experience in the college classroom setting and on their course evaluation sheets. Cooperating teachers were asked to complete a short questionnaire about the experience and to add any comments they wished to the college student verification form.

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Subjects

This study included a total of 88 college students who comprised the enrollment of three children's literature classes during the 1994-95 academic year. The students worked with 149 children: 15 kindergarteners, 58 first graders, 28 second graders, 25 third graders, 9 fourth graders, 6 fifth graders, and 8 children from special education/resource rooms.

Children were selected for the tutoring program by their teachers for various reasons. The most frequently cited reasons were: lack of progress in reading/communication skills; non-supportive home environments; children's lack of confidence, self-esteem, or shyness; and being a non-native English speaker. Not including the 15 non-native English speakers, 41 children were described as below grade level or their class in reading, slow readers, or lacking in emergent literacy skills. Twenty eight children were referred to the tutoring program because of the lack of help available to them in their homes, need for attention, or because of very troubled home environments. Twenty-one referrals were for children who were shy, and lacked self-esteem or self-confidence. Fifteen of the children were selected by teachers based on their lack of English proficiency: 13 were Spanish speakers, one Korean and one Thai. Only two of the 15 children were in ESL programs although all were having language and communication difficulties which were affecting their academic progress. Ten children were described as having learning difficulties or short attention spans. Other reasons of selection for this program included: one child with a visual impairment leading to blindness; a child who suffered from seizures; a child diagnosed as having ADHD; a child awaiting ADD testing results; one child diagnosed as having hyperactivity; one child identified as learning disabled; two children receiving special services for learning problems; one child with Down Syndrome; a child with severe neurological impairment; three children with dyslexia; and another child who is severely mentally challenged. In twenty two cases, the teachers' reasons for selection were not stated.

Results

The majority of the 88 teachers involved in this study wrote comments about the tutoring program. Only seventeen of the 88 teacher verification forms had no separate comments written. Two of these were signed for absent teachers. Of the remaining 71 forms, all but two had very positive statements about the college students' work. Comments included remarks about children's academic and social progress, rapport

established between college students and children, professionalism, role models, preparation, and desire for college students to continue working with children. Two teachers wrote comments indicating that they had not had the opportunity to be aware of what the college students were doing. With the exception of one of these two teachers, all other 86 teachers indicated that they wanted college students to work with the children again and 84 teachers indicated that they believed the children's reading/listening skills were enhanced by the program. Of the remaining four teachers, one stated that reading/literacy skill enhancement was "hard to equate;" one was absent and two did not complete this questionnaire item.

What were college students' impressions of this experience and did they benefit? Overwhelmingly, the college students who were generally in their junior year and education majors, rated this experience as positive. Non-education majors stated an increased respect for the profession of teaching. Education and special education majors saw this experience as confirming and verifying their career choice. Several stated that teaching was harder than they had thought and that it required pre-planning. Not all college students saw improvement in the literacy or communication skills of the children they tutored. Out of the 149 children, in 23 cases college students did not describe seeing reading improvement or behavior change. College students did recognize that children are different, that their interests differ, that self-esteem and self-confidence are important in learning, and that poor home environment impacts education. Several college students stated that their own self-confidence improved as a result of working independently in the school settings where they felt responsible for children's learning. College students were enlightened concerning the problems faced by young children. Some college students described home situations of children and expressed amazement at the difficulties children face. One student mentioned how apprehensive she had been to work with a child from a different culture who was non-English speaking.

Conclusions

This program has proven successful in preparing preservice teachers to work with children at risk for academic failure. College students were able to establish rapport with children who were from culturally diverse groups; they learned to view children with problems as individuals rather than problems; they became familiar with how schools function and the classroom teacher's difficulty in juggling multiple schedules; they used problem solving skills in selecting materials and strategies for

teaching; and they developed confidence in their professional choice of the teaching. Interestingly, students who were not education majors but who had to meet the same tutoring requirements, stated that they had more respect for teachers as a result of the assignment and that they, too, had confidence in their non-selection of teaching as a profession.

Classroom teachers strongly endorsed the field-based component. They identified a number of positive behavioral changes in children. Several college students asked and were permitted to continue work with children in the classrooms after the literature assignment was completed. Several children wrote letters or made special pictures to give their tutors.

This study supports Aramline and Hoover's (1989) contention that field experiences yield change in perceptions and that authentic learning experiences are an important part of the training for future teachers. Because the children selected for this study had the disadvantages of non-supportive home environments, lack of English facility and/or low SES,college students who were primarily white and English speaking with middle class SES had the opportunity to establish positive relationships with children in at risk situations. For many students this meant that they revised their beliefs about at risk children. Preservice teachers had the opportunity to practice and expand instructional strategies which had been presented in college classes and affirm their career choices. The study supports the research on the relationship between self-esteem and learning, the importance of identification and modeling, and the need for authentic learning through school partnerships. Classroom teachers overwhelmingly endorsed the tutoring program and noted its benefits to children. This study describes a model for working with at risk children in a field-based teacher training component which benefits the children, teachers and future teachers.

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